

Fragment of the Month: August 2009

Syria's links with the Jews of Cairo in the 15th and 16th centuries

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The Jewish communities in Syria had strong relations with the Jewish community in Cairo in the Mamluk period. The 'Nagid' (the head of the Jews in the Mamluk state) in Cairo was involved in the inner life of the Syrian communities, and commercial and familial relations linked the two regions. Although the government centre moved from Cairo to Istanbul in 1517, and the position of the 'Nagid' in Cairo was abolished, the close connection remained intact. In the Genizah we find traces of the correspondence between the two centres in the 15th and 16th centuries, e.g. letters from Aleppo to the Nagid in Cairo (BM Or. 5545.4; T-S NS 342.44), and a letter from Damascus to Cairo, possibly written in 1517 (T-S NS J332). The frequent occurrence of Syrian names in Egypt at that time is proof of a considerable movement of visitors and immigrants from Syria to Egypt. In letters, deeds and accounts from the Genizah from the 15–16th centuries a large number of individuals bearing names of Syrian origin (e.g., חלבי, חאמי/חמוי, and others) are mentioned as residents in Egypt.

During my visit to Cambridge (July 2008), I succeeded in finding, inter alia, two fragments of a letter written in Hebrew that was sent from Aleppo, probably at the end of the 15th century or the first half of the 16th century. The letter was given to a poor person from Aleppo, called here by the biblical nickname צובה, who intended to travel to Cairo principally to raise money. Before leaving Aleppo he obtained a letter of recommendation from the leadership of the community. The authors of the letter described his good virtues and asked the addressees (whose names are not preserved, but who were clearly leading citizens) to help him generously. The names of the signatories are difficult to decipher in the letter's current state, but it is possible to discern the typical Judaeo-Spanish name Siman Tov (סימן טוב), which strengthens our dating of the document to the 15th century or later. Other names appear to be Musta'rib, i.e., a Jew of native Arabic-speaking origin. It seems, therefore, that the letter was signed by leaders of the two elements of the Jewish community of Aleppo – natives and immigrants.



The left-hand side of the letter, T-S NS 264.56

Modern scholarship of this period presumes that the Musta'rib Jews assimilated to the Judaeo-Spanish immigrants and gradually lost their own identity and customs. But, in Aleppo, it seems that a separate Musta'rib identity continued to exist until the beginning of the 20th century. According to Y. Harel, this was an outcome of the activities of the Dayyan (or Ha-Dayyan) family, a notable clan who claimed Davidic descent. It seems that we can identify one of the signatories in our letter as a known Musta'rib rabbinic figure in Aleppo. Rabbi Moshe Dayan was the leader of the Aleppo Musta'rib community in the second half of the 15th century, and, probably, two of his sons signed this letter, Sa'adya

and an illegible name. Rabbi Issachar Ibn Sussan, in his book *Ibbur Shanim* (Venice 1579), quoted ר' סעדיה דיין צובה (= the Jewish Judge of Aleppo). It is plausible to identify him with Sa'adya ben Moshe in our letter. Sa'adya was still alive in 1539, when Issachar Ibn Sussan wrote the main part of his book.

The data about the Jewish community in Aleppo in the late Middle Ages is not abundant. This fragment contributes some important details and helps to build a greater understanding of the leadership of the Jewish community in Aleppo and its continued contacts with the Jewish centre in Cairo in this period.



The right-hand side of the letter, T-S NS 324.118

T-S NS 324.118 and T-S NS 264.56

[a]: uncertain reading; (a): deletion; {a}: reconstruction

1. // נפשו ועזרנוהו
2. נו ער{בי?}ם אנחנו וילד.. וחילה פנינו לכתוב//..... להיות לו לפה
3. ... {עני} ובן טובים ממשפחה טובה ממדינת צובה ל[כ]ל אחינו אנשי גא{//ולתנו אנשי ה.....

4. באנו בתחנה ובבקשה העֲנֵק תעניקה} // ונתן תתנו לו [ו]גומלי {חנ}
5. [בנים] כל עו[בר] ושב ואין א{נו} כמז{הירים אלא כמזכירים} // לכל קורא כתבנו ואיגרת עדותינו
6. בים ו..בנים גדולים {ו}קטנים חכמים ונבונ{ים} // חברים וחזנים איש איש (פכ) כפי מעלתו
7. ו{אל} ישוב דך נכלם עני ואביון יהללו שמיכם לפי // שהאיש הלזה מוביל כתבנו ההולך לקראת
8. [מעל]ת יקרת פינת צפירת תפארת גדולתכם הענוה כסתה פניו // לכן תשתדלו עימו ככל האפשר כי
9. וילדיו נתונים בהצר לכן כל נדיב לב ... להעניקו // להשביע נפשו השוקקה ובזכות זאת
10. יציליכם {ה}אל מכל הו[ה] ויתן לכם אחרית טוב ותקוה [ו]ה[ע]//לה אתכם אל ארץ מושבותכם
11. ומ{כל צרה וצוקה} ונזק יצילכם ויגן בעדכם ויפרוש סוכת ש//לומו עליכם ואהבה תהיה בניכם
12. וישבר עול הגוים מעל (צורם) (צאוכם) צאורכם[!] ויב[י]א מש//יח צדקנו ויבנה בית קדשנו
13. אוי"ר כנפ{ש}כם נפש[ות] חסידים וכנפש החותמים בפר//שת והיה ה' עמכם
14. ..א.. {בן כ}מה"ר משה הדין {ב}ן חייא ש[מ]ואל יוסף בן // סעדיה בן כמה"ר משה הדין
15. נסים בר סימן {טוב?} אליה בן

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Bibliography

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